



Is Realism Policy Relevant?

Evidence from Ukraine and Taiwan

SECURITY & FOREIGN POLICY

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Summary

- Criticism of realism is based on a largely superficial understanding of the paradigm. Critics treat realism as a one-dimensional approach.
- Realism is a paradigm that encompasses different and sometimes mutually contradictory approaches.
- Realist scholars strongly opposed U.S. military interventions, such as Iraq, which have proved disastrous.
- Offensive realism's rationale is unconvincing in the case of Ukraine. However, the international community's response falls well within the realist paradigm.
- Deterrence remains a vital policy recommendation of realism, as evidenced by the U.S. response to the Taiwan debacle.

Introduction

Because of its pessimistic interpretation of the nature of international politics, the realist paradigm is frequently targeted for criticism, especially in times of crisis. The war in Ukraine has provided yet another opportunity for critics to highlight the weaknesses of the paradigm and critique its explanation for the outbreak of the war. Critics argue that realism has flaws and can lead to the wrong policies when used as a guide for policy or analysis. [They](#) contend that realism adopts a very narrow interpretation of the concepts of power and security, while it is essential to acknowledge the full range of actions that states can utilize to achieve the ultimate objective of realism, survival. Secondly, critics argue that realism has failed to inform foreign policy decisions and warn against the perils of military interventions. Particularly in the case of the United States, they cite the costly interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria as evidence [that the realist paradigm does not influence foreign policy decisions](#).

Realism can be better understood as a paradigm that encompasses multiple approaches that can sometimes be mutually contradictory

Most of these criticisms are based on a superficial understanding of realism. They treat realism as a one-dimensional approach promoting a dystopic vision of how the world works—a pill for every sort of ill. But the realist paradigm is much more than that. Realism can be better understood as a paradigm that encompasses multiple approaches that can sometimes be mutually contradictory. For example, defensive and offensive realism both argue that the structure of the international system is responsible for its anarchical nature. They argue that the more poles there are in the global system, the higher the likelihood of conflict. However, they fundamentally disagree on how states should react to the anarchical nature of the international system: Defensive realism disagrees with power maximization, since it can elicit a counterbalancing response from the remaining powers. In contrast, offensive realism argues in favor of power maximization on the ground that states are more likely to try and pass the buck than assume than assuming responsibility for balancing. If used correctly, both approaches can account for states' behavior in different instances. Realists understand the limitations of the paradigm and have argued that realism does not try to explain [everything](#). Instead, it accepts that [war](#) is and always will be an integral component of the international system. In this short article, I will address the criticism of realism and its relevance with a focus on U.S. foreign policy in Ukraine and Taiwan. I will argue that U.S. foreign policy is consistent with realist tenets vis-a-vis Ukraine and Taiwan.

The failed military interventions made by the United States in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria are frequently used as examples of how realism is unable to inform U.S. foreign policy.

Realism is not policy-relevant

The failed military interventions made by the United States in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria are frequently used as examples of how realism is unable to inform U.S. foreign policy. The case of the Iraq war best illustrates the controversy regarding the explanatory value of realism as well as revealing the shortsightedness of the criticisms. Prominent realists including Stephen Walt, Kenneth Waltz, and John Mearsheimer placed an ad in the [New York Times](#) criticizing the Bush Administration for invading Iraq. In it, they argued that the invasion did not serve the interests of the United States, which would have been better served by an [offshore balancing](#) strategy. Realists posited that the Iraq war was motivated by liberal internationalist assumptions prioritizing democracy promotion and regime change as foreign policy options. This caused a significant rift between realists and liberal internationalists like Daniel Deudney and John Ikenberry. The latter responded to the criticism by arguing that the Iraq war was [yet another example of hegemonic realism](#), highlighting the role of primacy as the main explanation underlying the decision to go to war in Iraq.

Regardless of the disagreement between realists and liberal internationalists about the explanatory value of their respective approaches, the case of the Iraq war illustrates that tragedy

ensues when governments do not consider the policy recommendations of theories. In fact, realism did not influence the Bush Administration's decision, but this is not a criticism of the approach; rather, it is a criticism of the administration's failure to consider alternative points of view. Realists also pointed out that U.S. foreign policy's fixation with the Middle East has harmed the country's image and exponentially increased the costs associated with the United States' foreign policy. . This explains why realist scholars advocate the U.S. [abandoning](#) its efforts to transform the Middle East.

Wars rarely happen because of a single factor. In the case of Ukraine, the official narrative that Putin provided as an explanation for the "special military operation" related to the de-nazification and demilitarization of Ukraine--a claim which lacks any historical basis.

Realism and the War in Ukraine

The invasion of Ukraine fueled the criticism of realism still further. Mearsheimer's [argument](#) that the encirclement of Russia by NATO-allied countries had somehow contributed to Russia's decision to invade Ukraine has come in for heavy criticism. Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Mearsheimer has [argued](#) that Russia's decision was primarily influenced by the EU's eastward expansion and the West's backing of the pro-democracy movement in Ukraine, as evidenced by the Orange Revolution in 2004. Mearsheimer warned that annexing Crimea was only the first step in Russia's efforts to safeguard itself against Western expansion. He posited that a possible solution to the Ukrainian issue would be for the [West to abandon any intent to westernize Ukraine and instead use it to create a neutral buffer between NATO and Russia.](#) Mearsheimer's argument resonated with the Russian authorities and was [retweeted](#) by the official Twitter account of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This prompted pundits like Anne Applebaum to criticize Mearsheimer further for providing Russia with a [narrative](#) with which to justify the war.

Mearsheimer's argument regarding the outbreak of the Ukraine war is mistaken, but not because NATO expansion was not the reason for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Rather, Mearsheimer is wrong because he seeks to offer a one-dimensional explanation for a multifaceted phenomenon. Wars rarely happen because of a single factor. In the case of Ukraine, the official narrative that Putin provided as an explanation for the "special military operation" related to the denazification and demilitarization of Ukraine--a claim which lacks any [historical](#) basis. Moreover, Mearsheimer [overlooks](#) a key component of Russia's defensive capabilities, its nuclear arsenal, even though he has himself argued that nuclear weapons are the ultimate defense against foreign aggression. Russia's vast arsenal makes any foreign military intervention unthinkable, no matter how many countries close by its borders belong to the Western camp. Mearsheimer's predictions have been wrong before. In the 1990s, he mistakenly predicted that the end of the Cold War would transform Europe into a battleground, again due to great power competition for regional dominance. Thankfully, the lessons from the catastrophic World Wars and the influence of the European Union averted that nightmare scenario. Nevertheless, Mearsheimer's work remains relevant: he remains one of the top-cited authors in the discipline and, even if some of his arguments are mistaken, his work continues to influence younger scholars in the field.

U.S. foreign policy towards Ukraine is consistent with the realist paradigm.

Realism and U.S. Foreign Policy in Ukraine

Russia's invasion of Ukraine was an act of unwarranted aggression and elicited an immediate response from the United States and the European Union. The Biden administration pledged to support Ukraine to defend itself against Russian attacks. [Since 2014](#), the United States has committed more than \$29.5 billion in security assistance to Ukraine, with \$26.7 billion pledged since Russia's invasion in February 2022. Moreover, the administration has provided valuable [intelligence](#) to Kyiv, imposed comprehensive sanctions on the Russian economy, and supplied

the Ukrainian forces with [advanced weaponry](#). The support of the United States has thwarted Russia's aspirations for a swift victory in Ukraine.

U.S. foreign policy towards Ukraine is consistent with the realist paradigm. Realism aims to deter aggression by power maximization; if deterrence fails, realism argues that states have two options: direct engagement or balancing. As Paul Poast [claims](#): "When brought into policy, realist theory becomes realpolitik: the position that states should balance against their adversaries and seek relative gains rather than accept supranational and institutional constraints of their freedom of action in international affairs." Patrick Porter argues that [bleeding](#) Russia in Ukraine can reduce its ability to threaten NATO. However, realists have warned that support for Ukraine should not be [unconditional](#). The imposition of [no-fly zones](#), the [complete economic shutdown of Russia](#), or the deployment of NATO [troops](#) would force Russia to escalate the conflict and perhaps realize its threat to use nuclear weapons. Support for Ukraine should not risk destabilizing the entire international system.

U.S. foreign policy in Taiwan appears consistent with realist tenets in so far as deterrence is a priority for the United States. Realism would call for a strengthening of U.S-Taiwan relations in light of the threat from China.

Realism and U.S. Foreign Policy in Taiwan

The case of Taiwan is similar to that of Ukraine in that U.S. foreign policy is prepared to adopt a balancing approach in the event of a Chinese offensive. Tensions between China and Taiwan have been escalating. China appears hell-bent on continuing to pressure Taiwan, as evidenced by the [military incursions](#) in December 2022. The Biden Administration has taken concrete steps to enhance Taiwan's military capabilities and demonstrated its willingness to defend Taiwan against Chinese aggression. In [August 2021](#), the Biden Administration approved a \$750 million weapons sale to Taiwan. In [September](#), the Biden Administration approved the most significant arms sales of weapons to Taiwan, which amounted to \$1.1 billion. The deal came shortly after the tensions caused between the U.S. and China by U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's [trip](#) to Taiwan. In [December](#), the administration approved another arms sale of \$180 million. Moreover, during President Biden's visit to Japan, he reiterated his position on [defending](#) Taiwan against Chinese aggression.

U.S. foreign policy in Taiwan appears consistent with realist tenets in so far as deterrence is a priority for the United States. Realism would call for a strengthening of U.S-Taiwan relations in light of the threat from China. For deterrence to be successful, the threatened use of force needs to be credible. If the Biden administration were to proclaim its willingness to assist Taiwan without taking steps to demonstrate this commitment, then China would be more tempted to test the validity of the threat. Is this option a risky one for the Biden Administration? According to realism, we live in an anarchical world in which states can never know each other's intentions. The actions of the Biden Administration have caused a significant backlash, with Stephen Wertheim arguing that Biden's declaration to defend Taiwan is potentially [dangerous](#).

Realism does not promote war. It merely accepts that war is an intrinsic part of the international system.

Conclusion

It is easy to dismiss the arguments that realism is immoral, indeterminate or rigid. Like all theories, realism has its limitations, and recent scholars are aware of them. However, ignoring the policy relevance of the paradigm simply because you disagree with its basic tenets is shortsighted. Realism does not promote [war](#). It merely accepts that war is an intrinsic part of the international system. Mearsheimer's argument regarding the outbreak of war in Ukraine is weak, but cannot be discounted entirely as one possible explanation among many. Neither can we argue that realism is not policy-relevant because of failed U.S. military interventions which, as the empirical record shows, were not instigated by realist arguments. Regarding Ukraine and Taiwan, realism recognizes the need for the United States to balance and deter Russia and China

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respectively. It also understands that support cannot be unconditional or that the bill cannot be footed entirely by the send of the support. Regardless of the disagreements over the implementation of realism, its value remains in its ability to account for conditions that are likely to disrupt the stability of the international system. Scholars are divided over the future of the global system in the wake of the war in Ukraine: some argue that the global system will return to its more anarchic roots, while others disagree and state that the rules-based international order will continue to influence the behavior of states. Regardless of the outcome of this debate, one thing is certain: realism will retain its explanatory value.